

recoiled instinctively, fearing the coiled, lithe power pressed up against my flesh. It became all too clear that if the panther decided to do to me what it had done to Corbin, there would be nothing I could do to stop it. No amount of rage would allow a mere man to overcome physical power bred and molded over the course of millions of years of evolution.

So I did what I had to do to survive. I encouraged, with a shaky voice, the love of the panther. I was even so bold as to reach out with a trembling hand and pet the terrible beast on the top of its sleek ebony head. It dropped again to all fours and rubbed up against me, purring.

As the panther dropped below my line of sight, I was once again able to peer down to the end of the hall. There, where Kira had been standing not more than a few moments before, stood a masked woman. The dim outline of her body glowed, most likely due to the reflection of the dim fungus-light off her white tunic, which covered her from shoulder to foot. Her hair was long, brunette, and braided up above her head. She wore a narrow single-beamed crown of brass. Her feet were partially covered by open air sandals. But my gaze was drawn to the mask. The features painted on the mask were feminine and expressionless, and this odd lack of feature struck a deep disharmonic chord within me.

How she could have come to be there, standing alone at the end of the hall, without my notice, I did not know. But the moment she fell within my gaze, the masked woman raised her arms out on both sides, as though she wished to embrace me, and stepped measured paces down the hall towards me. This was a very disturbing sight. I am certain I would have turned and ran if I had not been concerned that the panther would view my response as fear and give chase. So I had no choice but to wait as the masked woman made her spectral approach.

The panther's ears straightened as the masked woman neared, and it whirled smoothly around to leap up into her arms.

"My beautiful, beautiful, beast," the masked woman cooed with adoration, hugging the panther like it was a common cat. "It has been so long since I have held you in my arms."

I knew then that the masked woman was no human being of the kind I knew. For when she spoke, the tone of her voice possessed a most amazing quality. When she spoke she sounded like she was singing. One moment her voice was clearly understandable as common speech with a feminine tone, while the next I could not even pay attention to her words, for they dripped from her mouth, indescribably beautiful musical chords. Upon whom they bless, their words will flow forth from their mouths like the sweetest nectar. Despite being utterly entranced by her wondrous ode, I was able to pick out the lyrics: We know how to speak many false things, as though they were true, we know too, when we wish, to utter aletheia.

Then the masked woman straightened, looking up from her cat with those expressionless blank eyes. "Mighty Zeus is angry. He has judged humankind no longer fit to reign as kings of this world."

I did not know how to respond.

"Have you come to free my precious beasts? You have been given the key."

"I have no key," I replied.

"The key is in your hand."

I looked down and discovered I was still clutching the sketch I had composed of the panther. What had she meant? Was she implying that I could free the animals in the room simply by sketching them? When I looked back the masked woman and the panther had stepped beyond me.

"Come with me now. You must free all of my pets. It is the will of Zeus."

She strode out into the oval entry chamber with the panther at her side, and I reluctantly followed. She stopped briefly at the edge of the river that plunged down into the blackness.

"Go my pet; you are free to feed on the flesh of the Earth."

With that, the panther whirled, took four long, smooth strides, and leapt up towards the tunnel high above; the very same tunnel which led outside, to the world. Kira had to have been up there somewhere.

I was about to give chase, attempt to warn Kira of the impending danger, but was stopped by the